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Why Aren't We Aging Better and Healthier?

By Melanie Reynolds

Decades ago, public health focused primarily on what we call “communicable,” or infectious, diseases. These are diseases like measles, tuberculosis, and polio that we can “catch” if we’re exposed to the right (or wrong) virus or other pathogen. Through immunization and good sanitation and hygiene, we’ve come a long way toward limiting these.

But now we’re seeing a burgeoning epidemic of chronic diseases, like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. These are directly associated with poor lifestyle choices and are now the leading causes of death and disability in Lewis and Clark County. They are the most common, costly – and preventable – of all health problems.

Prevention of disease is at the heart of public health. Although it may seem like we nag sometimes – about exercising, eating right, avoiding tobacco – our overarching mission is to encourage each of us to make the right choices when it comes to protecting and improving our health. At the same time, we strive to make the right choice the easy choice by promoting health-friendly public policy.

Public health, practiced well, saves dollars, heartache, and lives.

Drinking, Smoking, Sitting

According to data from the 2011 Montana Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), there’s lots of room for improvement when it comes to behaviors associated with chronic disease among Montanans 65 and older.

Let’s look at drinking, smoking, and a sedentary lifestyle, for example.

Why these particular behaviors?

- Excessive drinking is associated with cancers of the liver, head and neck, colon, pancreas, and breast, as well as with diabetes and heart disease.
- Smoking is associated with cancer, heart disease and stroke, asthma and many other chronic conditions.

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- Sedentary behavior increases the risk of cancer, heart disease and stroke, and diabetes.

Discouraging Findings

According to the BRFSS survey:

- While we have made tremendous progress in reducing smoking in our state, 11 percent of Montanans 65 and older still smoke.
- 7 percent of older Montanans drink excessively. (Excessive drinking is defined as either heavy drinking or binge drinking. Heavy drinking is more than 2 drinks a day for men and more than 1 drink a day for women on average. Binge drinking is having 5 or more drinks on one occasion for men and having 4 or more drinks on one occasion for women during the past 30 days.)
- 47 percent don't get enough physical activity. (The level considered "enough" is defined as getting at least 150 minutes of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity or any equivalent combination per week.)

What Can We Do?

It's difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from a single survey. But I do think this one is an important reminder that:

- We in the field of public health still have plenty of work to do to encourage and enable people to make behavior choices that will help them lead longer and healthier lives.
- We as individuals need to keep striving to make the healthy choice, whether that means avoiding tobacco, getting exercise, eating well, getting recommended health screenings, getting enough sleep, reducing stress in our lives, or not abusing alcohol and drugs.
- Policymakers need to give serious consideration to laws and policies that enable healthy living.

If you would like to get regular tips and encouragement to maximize your health, please consider "liking" the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department on Facebook. You'll find us at www.facebook.com/LewisAndClarkHealth

You can also visit our website at www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org.

If you need help to quit using tobacco, contact the Montana Tobacco Quitline, 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669). It offers free educational materials, cessation coaching, and nicotine-replacement therapy, as well as reduced-cost medications to help you quit. It has a proven track record of success.

Finally, stay tuned to this monthly column in the Independent Record, where we'll continue to tackle important health issues of the day. If you have a specific topic you'd like to see us cover, let us know at healthinfo@lccountymt.gov

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